DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 753 FL 018 651

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TITLE Three Refugee Women: Their Stories.
INSTITUTION Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC. Refugee Service Center.
SPONS AGENCY Department of State, Washington, DC. Bureau of Refugee Programs.
PUB DATE Oct 89
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT In America: Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement; n6 Oct 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); Expectation; *Females; Foreign Countries; *Life Events; Quality of Life; *Refugees; *Reminiscence
IDENTIFIERS Cambodia; Laos; Vietnam

ABSTRACT

In this newsletter issue the stories of three Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese) refugee women are told that describe their exodus from their countries to America and what their experiences have been, so far, in this country. The women also describe what they look for in their future. (GLR)

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In America
Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement
Number 6 • October 1989

Three Refugee Women: Their Stories

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by Donald A. Ranard

Amrong Chia, high school senior, Long Beach, California

Eighteen-year-old Amrong Chia lives with her mother, younger brother and sister, and three cousins in Long Beach, a city in Southern California. The family lives in a small two-bedroom bungalow in a low-rent, mostly Mexican and Asian neighborhood.

Amrong is friendly and vivacious, and as she talks brightly about her school and her plans for the future, it seems as if the dark days of the Cambodian holocaust have disappeared from her conscious memory. But a question about the Pol Pot period triggers a detailed account of her experiences that is remarkable in its recall, given her age at the time: She was five when the Khmer Rouge assumed power in Cambodia. As she tells her story, one is reminded of the words of Haing Ngor, another holocaust survivor: "I have been many things in life . . . But nothing has shaped my life as much as surviving the Pol Pot regime. I am a survivor of Pol Pot. That's who I am."

"My father was a soldier in the Lon Nol army, and right after Pol Pot took over, he went away to hide from the Khmer Rouge. Before he left, he told my mother, 'Sell all your jewelry and clothes. If there is peace, I'll see you again.' That was the last time we saw him.

We lived in the capital, Phnom Penh, and after Pol Pot, we were moved with everyone else out to the countryside. First we lived on a small farm in the jungle and then we were moved with thousands of other people to a big farm in Khampong Thong province, about an hour and a half by bus from Phnom Penh. The men and women were separated. My younger brother and sister and I lived with my mother; my older brother and sister were sent somewhere else—I'm not sure where. I didn't see them again for several years.

We lived in a small wooden hut with a roof made of palm leaves. They made people work like animals. Every day my mother got up at dawn and worked until about eight o'clock. All they gave us to eat was rice soup—really just water with a few pieces of rice in it. A lot of people starved to death. We might have died too, except my mother sold some of her jewelry and clothing to some of the villagers for rice, salt, and sugar. She buried the food in the ground, and at night, after everyone was asleep, she would dig it up and make a small fire and cook it. We put things around the fire to hide the flames. I was very, very scared. I knew if we got caught they would kill us.

My mother was always afraid that the Khmer Rouge would find out that my father was a soldier. They suspected it because they found his army blanket in our belongings. My mother told them that she had found the blanket on the road from Phnom Penh to Khampong Thong. But they didn't believe her, and when my mother was away working in the fields, the *chlop* [a Khmer Rouge official who investigated people's backgrounds] would try to make me say that my father was a soldier.

Published by the Refugee Service Center, Center for Applied Linguistics
under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State

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Every morning before she went to work my mother would say to me, 'If the *chlop* asks you about your father, tell him that your father is dead and that he was a teacher and I was a farmer before we got married.' It would have been better to say my father was a farmer, of course, but we couldn't say that because they knew we had come from the city. I memorized the story and repeated it back to my mother every morning.

Once the *chlop* brought a bowl of rice and two meters of cotton. He said to me, 'Srey Pot (that was my nickname; it means girl who is very still and quiet), tell me about your father. Don't lie. Tell me the truth and I will give you some rice to eat and some cotton to make clothes.' But I always told him the same story: My father was dead, he was a teacher, and my mother was a farmer. After a while they stopped asking me. I was about five years old at the time.

In 1979, the Vietnamese took over our country, and we moved to Khampong Thong City. We lived in a big bedroom in a house near a cinema. I went to school for the first time and learned to read and write Khmer. I was happy. Life was normal. My mother taught in a Cambodian school and gave French lessons on the side for extra money. She saved the money for our escape, she told me later.

We waited for my father for four years. In 1983, my mother decided that there was no reason to wait anymore and that we should leave for Thailand. It was very dangerous—many people were shot trying to escape—so my mother had to plan very carefully. *(The family set off for Khao I Dang, travelling by bus, motorcycle, and by foot. Along the way, they were shot at by Vietnamese soldiers and robbed by Cambodian bandits. Finally, exhausted and near starvation, they reached Khao I Dang Camp.)*

The first six months in Khao I Dang were very hard because we didn't have legal papers. That meant we didn't get food rations and we had to watch out for the guards. We stayed in a billet with another Cambodian family. My mother still had some jewelry left, and she sold it for food.

I went to Cambodian school every day, and I studied English in private classes whenever I had the money to pay for the lessons. Each English lesson cost one *baht*. Sometimes my mother or another adult gave me a *baht*. I would save the money, and when I had 30 *baht* I would study English for one month. Then I would start saving again. That's how I first studied English.

In 1988, after we were accepted to go to the U.S., we went to the Philippines to study English. I studied in the PASS program. It was a very good program; the teachers helped us a lot. In my free time, I taught English to a Vietnamese boy. I think he was surprised because most Cambodians don't like Vietnamese, but I feel that all of that is in the past. It's time to change the thinking. One time he said to me, 'Amrong, why do you help me?' I said, 'Like the Filipino teachers help me, I help you.'

The first place we lived in the U.S. was Phoenix, Arizona. I liked it—it was clean and quiet and the people were friendly. But it was very hot, there were only a few Cambodians, and my mother missed Cambodian people and language. That's why we moved to Long Beach.

While we were in Arizona, an American friend, someone we met in the refugee camp, came to visit us. He works in Washington, D.C. He asked me if I would like to go to summer school at Phillips Exeter [a private secondary school in Massachusetts]. He had been a student there when he was a boy, and he said he could help me get a scholarship for a special summer program.

Phillips Exeter was very difficult, but I liked it very much. I studied ESL. I liked it because it was quiet and the students were serious—not like here. Here there are gangs, and the students don't study hard. They don't listen to the teachers. They just want to have a good time.

My plan is to graduate from high school here and then go back to Phillips Exeter for a year. After that, I want to go to college—somewhere on the East Coast. I want to study international communication because I want to be a diplomat. I want to go back to my country and help the people there.

No matter what happens, I will never forget what happened during the Pol Pot time. Even though it was many years ago and I was very young, I can remember everything clearly—like it happened yesterday. I can't forget it. I don't want to forget it. It's in my mind all the time. I want to remember what they did—how they destroyed the temples and killed the monks. Even the monks! How could they do that? They treated us like animals. All these things I can't forget." ⊠

Yeng Xiong, mother and student, Wausau, Wisconsin

Like many Hmong women, 20-year-old Yeng Xiong got married while she was still in high school. And like many Hmong women, she had a baby within a year of her marriage. But unlike most Hmong women who get married while in high school, Yeng Xiong didn't drop out of school after she had her baby. She will graduate next semester, and if everything goes according to plan, next year Yeng will join the tiny minority of Hmong women attending college.

Yeng's ability to balance traditional pressures with new-world opportunities reflects a bicultural sophistication typical of her age group. She is a member of what researcher Rubén Rumbaut calls the 1.5 generation. In age and in values, attitudes, and behavior, the 1.5 generation is midway between the traditional world of their parents and the world of their younger brothers and sisters born in the U.S. It is a difficult position, one that requires tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction, but it has enabled them to take advantage of new-world opportunities without losing connection to family, community, and culture.

Yeng's success is also a result of past advantage as well as support from family and school. Unlike many Hmong girls who arrive in the U.S. with little or no education, Yeng arrived with five years of schooling.

Yeng's journey from Laos to Wausau began one day 11 years ago when the entire population of her village—several hundred men, women, and children—left their home in northern Laos and set out on a year-long trek to Thailand. When Yeng Xiong and her family arrived at the Thai border, the group had dwindled down to a few families. The others had got lost along the way, become too sick to continue, or been caught by soldiers.

The family stayed in Ban Vinai for six years—not because they didn't qualify for resettlement, but because Yeng Xiong's father, like many men in Ban Vinai, hoped that the situation in Laos would change and he would be able to return home. During the long wait in Ban Vinai, Yeng put her time to good use, completing five years of Thai primary school.

In 1985, after the girl's parents had separated, Yeng Xiong's mother decided to join relatives in Wausau, a small city in central Wisconsin with a growing Hmong population. Yeng arrived in Wausau without benefit of English language training; the PASS program had not begun yet and at 15, she was too young for the adult program. The abrupt transition from refugee camp to American high school was made more difficult by the fact that Wausau did not at that time offer ESL classes for high school students; there were not enough high school-aged Hmong students to make up a class. Placed in "mainstream" ninth grade classes, Yeng Xiong at times felt overwhelmed by the challenge of keeping up with her classmates, but with the help of her teachers and the encouragement of her uncles, she finished the year with passing grades.

It was during her first year in Wausau that Yeng's future husband arrived in town to open an Asian grocery—and also, Yeng hints shyly, to get to know Yeng, with a view towards a possible marriage. As one of a small number of Hmong college graduates, he was, Yeng says, "kind of famous" in the Hmong community. That fact, as well as her own family's pressure, persuaded Yeng to accept his marriage proposal.

A year after the marriage, during her junior year in high school, Yeng had her first child. Although her family expected Yeng to drop out of school, she was determined to graduate. A teacher tutored her at home, her sister-in-law—with whom Yeng and her husband share a house—helped take care of the baby, and her husband, who supported Yeng's desire to finish school, also helped with the baby. She finished the year with a B+ average. After graduating from high school, Yeng plans to major in education in college and become an elementary school teacher.

Although Yeng has managed to balance marriage and education, it is not a path she recommends for others. "It's difficult," she says. "My advice to Hmong students in Phanat Nikhom is: Finish school before you get married." ⊠

Mrs. Hoang, restaurant owner, Arlington, Virginia

A small, slightly ramshackle place with clapboard siding, the Chesapeake Crab House seems out of place in downtown Arlington, where sleek, high-rise office buildings and a new shopping complex have replaced family-run businesses. But good prices, service, and food, and a diverse menu (with 143 items, the fare ranges from Vietnamese soups and Cantonese crabs to American fish and fries and French bouillabaisse) have made the restaurant popular, especially on summer nights, when there is outdoor dining under a canopy strung with Christmas lights.

The driving force behind the restaurant's success is Mrs. Hoang, a 45-year-old Vietnamese woman who

came to the U.S. in 1981 with her husband, a former army captain in the South Vietnamese army, and five children. In Saigon, prior to the communist takeover, Mrs. Hoang had enjoyed the moderate privileges of an army captain's wife. She didn't work outside the house—to do so would have given the impression that her husband wasn't taking care of his family—and with servants to clean and cook and help with the children, there wasn't that much to do at home.

Shortly after the communist victory in 1975, her husband was sent to reeducation camp, and Mrs. Hoang's life changed forever. From 1975 until her husband's release from prison in 1979, Mrs. Hoang supported her four children by selling food, fabrics, and medicine on the streets of Saigon. In 1980, after a harrowing escape by boat to Malaysia followed by six months in the PRPC, where Mrs. Hoang studied English for the first and last time ("After I came here, I didn't have time to study," she says), the family arrived in the U.S. In Houston and then in Arlington, Mrs. Hoang worked as a waitress, a cook, and a clerk in a printing shop to support her family; her husband had a liver ailment, and most of the time was unable to work. In 1987, six years after their arrival in the U.S., the Hoangs opened the Chesapeake Crab House, with Mrs. Hoang's brother as co-owner.

Despite the restaurant's success, there are no plans to expand. "I want to spend more time with my children," says Mrs. Hoang, who has worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for the past 2 years. "They need their mother." She is proud of her children; two are in college and the other three are doing well in high school. She has managed to avoid the two mistakes that many other Vietnamese parents make with their children, she says: They are unreasonably strict, causing the child to rebel, and they are so caught up in "making it" in America that they don't pay enough attention to their children. "You have to be reasonable," she says, "and you have to spend time with them. After all, that's why we work so hard—for our children." ⊠

In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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In America has been developed and printed under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State. The material appearing herein does not necessarily represent the policy of that agency, nor the endorsement of the federal government.

In America is published six times a year and distributed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.

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